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CAMBODIA: EXPERIMENTATION AND PARADOXES

ANNCR:

THAILAND, LAST MONTH, CLOSED ITS BORDERS TO WOULD-BE REFUGEES FROM CAMBODIA. BUT FROM THE ACCOUNTS OF THE MANY CAMBODIANS LIVING IN REFUGEE CAMPS IN THAILAND AND FROM REPORTS CARRIED ON PHNOM PENH RADIO, THERE EMERGES A PICTURE OF AN UNUSUAL AND PARADOXICAL EXPERIMENT TAKING PLACE IN CAMBODIA. VOA'S JOSEPH KUN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE REFUGEE ACCOUNTS AND THE TERSE DISPATCHES OF PHNOM PEHN RADIO HAVE GIVEN THE OUTSIDE WORLD A CONTRASTING PICTURE OF LIFE IN CAMBODIA UNDER COMMUNIST RULE. ON THE ONE HAND, THERE APPEARS TO BE A STRONGLY PRAGMATIC ELEMENT IN THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO GET ON WITH ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION. BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, ALL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY HAS REPORTEDLY CEASED, WITH AN INCREDIBLE WASTE OF INTELLECTUAL TALENT.

BRITISH JOURNALIST MARTIN WOOLLACOTT -- IN AN ARTICLE WRITTEN FOR THE "WASHINGTON POST -- SPEAKS OF PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS BEHIND THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT'S EXPERIMENT OF FORCING THE URBAN POPULATION OUT OF THE CITIES AND INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE. THE MAJOR TASK WHICH FACED THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT WHEN IT ACHIEVED NATIONAL POWER, HE OBSERVES, WAS TO RESTORE AGRICULTURAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN A COUNTRY

WHERE THE LARGE PROPORTION OF THE POPULATION HAD BEEN DEPENDENT ON FOREIGN ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND WHERE MUCH OF THE PRODUCTIVE LAND HAD BEEN ABANDONED.

THE INITIAL SOLUTION WAS TO MOVE THE URBAN POPULATION -- SWOLLEN WITH TENS OF THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES FROM COMMUNIST-HELD AREAS -- INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE. AND THIS, FROM ALL REPORTS, HAS GIVEN THE NEW CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT THE LABOR NEEDED TO CULTIVATE THE EXISTING AGRICULTURAL LAND AND OPEN UP NEW OR PREVIOUSLY ABANDONED AREAS FOR FOOD AND OTHER CROPS, PARTICULARLY COTTON.

BUT, FOR THE CAMBODIAN LABORER, MISTER WOOLLACOTT WRITES, LIVING CONDITIONS REMAIN EXTREMELY HARSH. THE OFFICIAL RATION IS REPORTEDLY ABOUT ONE CUP OF UNCOOKED RICE A DAY PER WORKER....WELL BELOW THAT NEEDED FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF HARD PHYSICAL LABOR. STILL, HE SAYS, THERE'S EVIDENCE THAT THE LABOR GROUPS, WHICH NOW FORM THE BASIC UNIT OF CAMBODIAN SOCIETY, ARE BEING EMPLOYED WITH INCREASING EFFICIENCY.

THE PRAGMATISM INHERENT IN ECONOMIC PLANNING IS IN SHARP CONTRAST WITH THE NEGLECT OF EDUCATIONAL ACITIVITY AT ALL LEVELS, FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL UP. "NEW YORK TIMES" CORRESPONDENT DAVID ANDELMAN -- WHO TRAVELLED TO THE CAMBODIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN THAILAND -- REPORTS THAT THE SCHOOLS IN CAMBODIA, WHICH WERE CLOSED DURING THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER, HAVE NOT REOPENED. ACCORDING TO CAMBODIAN REFUGEES, THERE HAS BEEN NO ATTEMPT BY THE COMMUNIST AUTHORITIES TO INSTRUCT CHILDREN IN ANY OF THE BASIC

SUBJECTS. AT THE SAME TIME, HIGHER EDUCATION, IT'S SAID, HAS BEEN ABOLISHED, BOOKS ARE NOT AVAILABLE, AND NO NEWSPAPERS ARE BEING PUBLISHED.

PHNOM PENH RADIO HAS CARRIED NO MENTION OF SCHOOLS OR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY SINCE IT BEGAN BROADCASTING UNDER COMMUNIST AUSPICES LAST SPRING. THE NEW CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT, THE REFUGEES CLAIM, HAS ALSO SHOWN PARTICULAR HOSTILITY TOWARD THE COUNTRY'S INTELLECTUALS. FORMER TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE, THEY SAY, HAVE BEEN TRYING TO HIDE THEIR BACKGROUND IN FEAR OF BEING PERSECUTED.

THESE ARE BUT A FEW OF THE SEEMING CONTRADICTIONS AT WORK IN CAMBODIA IN THE RULING GROUP'S EFFORTS TO CREATE A NEW SOCIETY. THE BIG QUESTION NOW IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEY ACCEPT OR REJECT DOCTRINAIRE COMMUNIST SOLUTIONS TO ACCOMPLISH THIS GOAL.

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